



The story of Mary Boleyn comes to us in bits and pieces, if we use the historical record as our guide to her life.

We cannot be sure when she was born, but that event likely took place sometime between 1499 and 1500. Her probable place of birth was Blickling Hall, in Norfolk, where the old mansion was replaced with a "new" home (around 1616), now owned by Britain's National Trust.



She was the daughter of Elizabeth Howard (a lady-in-waiting to Catherine of Aragon) and Thomas Boleyn (an educated, highly ambitious man with a quick wit who loved jousting and longed to improve his status within the English Court).

Of the family's three children, historians believe that Mary was the oldest, followed by her sister Anne and her brother George. She likely received the type of education available for young women of her time, focusing on activities like reading, writing, singing, playing a musical instrument, dancing and sewing.

In about 1514, Mary became a lady-in-waiting to Henry VIII's sister, Mary Tudor, who was married—at the time—to King Louis XII of France. When Mary Tudor—who was known for her beauty and her long red-gold hair—became a Dowager Queen, because her much-older husband the King died less than three months after their marriage, Mary Boleyn was out of a job.



Records aren't clear about Boleyn's next position. She may have:

- Stayed in France, becoming a lady-in-waiting to Queen Claude (the wife of the new French King, Francis I)—as did her sister, Anne Boleyn; or
- She may have returned to England with the Dowager Queen (who, before leaving France, married Charles Brandon, 1st Duke of Suffolk, without first getting permission from her brother, Henry VIII).

However long she remained in France, after Louis XII died, history tells us that Mary Boleyn became the mistress—at least for a time—of the new King, Francis I (who reigned between 1515 and 1547).



By 1520, Mary Boleyn was back in England. We know this because she married Sir William Carey on the 4th of February, 1520, at the Greenwich Chapel Royal. The King, Henry VIII, attended their wedding.

Around 1522, William Carey who, by all accounts, was a handsome young man, began to receive grants from the King. Meanwhile, Mary's father—Thomas Boleyn—also continued his court rise in the Tudor court, becoming a Knight of the Garter, Treasurer of the Household and Viscount Rochford.

Historians believe those gifts and titles likely coincided with another event: Mary Boleyn became one of Henry VIII's mistresses.

Mary's close relationship with the King lasted about three years. During that time, she had two children whose last names were "Carey," although (according to some historians) the daughter (Catherine, born in 1524) and the son (Henry, born in 1526) resembled Henry VIII.

The King, however, never acknowledged the children as his.

When Mary was expecting her second child, Henry VIII turned his attentions elsewhere. His eyes fell upon Mary's sister, Anne.

During the 1528 outbreak of the sweating sickness, Mary lost her husband to the illness on the 22nd of June. For the next four years, we don't know much about Mary's life. Her sister's relationship with the King, in that time frame, continued to grow.

In 1532, we catch-up with Mary again. Historical records reveal that she accompanied Henry and Anne during their trip to France to meet Francis I (with whom Mary had a prior relationship). In the new year, she was at court where she gave the King a black-work collar which she'd made for him.

When Henry VIII finally married Anne Boleyn, Mary (apparently wearing a beautiful scarlet-velvet dress) attended her sister during the Coronation. She also became one of Anne's ladies-in-waiting.

In 1534, Mary decided on a new husband and married him without the permission of the King or her family. Even worse, to outsiders, she chose a man named William Stafford who was far-below her own station in life. A soldier, he was also a gentleman usher to the King.

Mary had fallen in love with the man, not with his standing.

While that may not seem like a problem, viewing the situation with 21st-century eyes, Mary's actions were scandalous at the time. For marrying so far below her station, the Queen's sister paid the price when she was banished from the Tudor court.

In the end, however, maybe banishment was a good thing. When Anne fell from the King's grace, Mary was no longer serving at court.

She survived her sister and brother, who were both executed at the Tower of London in May of 1536, by about seven years. No one knows where her grave is located.

The image, at the top of this page, depicts a painting which hangs at Hever Castle (seen, below) where Anne Boleyn lived for part of her life. Historians believe the work is a portrait of Mary Boleyn, but that has not been confirmed.



Credits:

Image thought to be of Mary Boleyn, maintained at Hever Castle, online via Wikimedia Commons.

In-text images:

Blickling Hall, believed to be the birthplace of Mary Boleyn and her siblings, as it appears today. The original home was replaced in 1616.

Mary Tudor, Princess of England, Queen of France, Duchess of Suffolk, younger sister of Henry VIII, as she appeared about the time she was married to King Louis XII. Portrait, by an unknown artist in the French School, now maintained by the UK's National Portrait Gallery.

Francis I, King of France, as he appeared between 1515-1520. The portrait may have been created by an anonymous artist or by Jean Clouet. It is now maintained at Musée Condé in Chantilly, France.

Photo of Hever Castle, as it appeared on August 12, 2008; photographer-released, public-domain photo.

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Media Stream



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